

To my knowledge, there is no book titled “Baby’s First Existential Crisis.” I feel certain in saying this, because I’m sure if there was, I’d have read it cover to cover a few times by the age of eight. Regardless, I remember my first such crisis; the terrible lucidity in the realization that I was a real person, a fully functional human being, that I used my brain to move my hands and feet and lips and tongue, that I was both a cause and effect in and of the world around me. I was sitting on the floor in the kitchen in my parents house when it happened, and I’ll be damned if it wasn’t the most terrifying moment of my life. *I’m real!* I thought. As if I was quoting Pinocchio. *I’m real and my mother is real and my father is real and my brother is real. All the people in the world that I have never met are real and they move their hands and legs and lips and tongues with their brains, just like me.*

Approximately 16 years later, I find myself referring back to this and the many subsequent *what-does-it-mean-to-be-human* episodes I’ve had in my life as I work on my BFA senior thesis project in printmaking. With a much greater capacity for critical thinking at age 22 than age 6, I now better understand why I found the reality of my existence, the reality of the existence of other people, our common mortality, and my middle-class religious upbringing so troubling. Beginning with idea that I was one of the humans chosen by God to go to heaven and that “other” people, who may or may not be generally more honest, generous, and better than myself, were destined for hell, I began to question the arbitrariness of luck and circumstance. I also spent a great deal of my childhood time and energy trying to make peace with this idea that one human could be inherently deserving of a better life or better treatment than another.

This idea of arbitrary privilege has reappeared in much of the institutionalized thinking I’ve encountered in my life, far beyond religion. While a lot of these schools of thought are enforced by authorities that go unquestioned by a great majority of people, trying to accept this mindset as fact and move on with my life has only ever stricken me with physical, emotional, and mental unrest; I constantly wondered what makes me so different than people in different circumstances, other than those circumstances? I came up with no answer. Every person has fingers, earwax, hair, livers, eardrums, physical and emotional pain, mental disturbances; I had nightmares and fits over why I had been placed in the circumstances I had and not others.

I’ve come across this entitlement and interpersonal disconnection in the institutions of religion, higher education, capitalism, the gender binary, the U.S. prison system - to name a few. My disturbance with these institutionalized troubles and the multitude of injustices not listed only informed my already instinctive disturbance at the human ability to arbitrarily distance oneself from relating to another human for any reason. So often people take in information about the suffering or success of other people as if they’re talking about something as mundane and impersonal as the weather. But one person could just as easily be another! One human’s pain and happiness could just as easily have been felt by another human. The last two lines of Pablo Neruda’s poem “The Clumsy Passersby” say it all:

“(under our clothes, the same thirsty skin) (the hair, the same hair, only in different colors)” (Neruda).

Early in the process of deciding on the form and content of my project, I came to the conclusion that I didn't want to address a specific issue. I wanted my project to be more subtle and personal in its disturbedness, because that is how these issues affect me personally. This unrest is phrased perfectly by David Foster Wallace, who says,

“There is also a very quiet but very sturdy and constant tragic undercurrent that concerns a people who are completely lost, who are lost within their families and lost within their nation and lost within their time and who only want some sort of direction or purpose or sense of community or love” (Wallace, 5).

I hoped to touch on these ideas of humanity, empathy, and isolation with all of the humor and tragedy that Kurt Vonnegut employs in his writing when he makes statements like, “Do you realize that all great literature... is about what a bummer it is to be human? Isn't it such a relief to hear somebody say that?” or “the truth is, we know so little about life, we don't know what the good news is and what the bad news is.” Combining the text-based take on these ideas with art is something I admire about the work of Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Dr. Seuss, all of whom I've spent a lot of time researching (see figures 14 - 18). They too have successfully employed a dialogue between the comic and tragic parts of life.

This research led me to these definitions, which I would return to repeatedly in the making of my IP:

Humanity:

- 1: the quality or state of being humane
- 2a: the quality or state of being human
- b: human attributes or qualities.

Empathy:

The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in objectively explicit manner: also the capacity for this.

Combined, these two concepts form the core of my IP. Humanity is simply the state of being human and being humane to other humans, and empathy is the ability to recognize and carry internally another human's pain, happiness, needs, wants, and circumstances with the same importance one would carry their own: to collectivize the human experience and acknowledge the importance of doing so. To disregard the needs and struggles of other humans is to disregard needs and struggles that could just as easily be your own; it is inhumane, but many of the powers that be institutionally teach people to do so



As a result of all this research and meditation on humanity, I decided to take the physical pieces of humans that everyone can relate to, and make them as unrelatable as we make each other through our social constructs and institutions. I've taken the physical attributes that all humans have, and made them unrelatable, even disturbing, through unrealistic juxtaposition and distortion of said parts (see figures 1-12 (detail shots of the prints)).



This project serves as a tongue in cheek manual explaining “How to be Human” to the viewer; it will poke fun at how similar all people are, how easily we could be in each others shoes, and how stupidly tragic it is that we've created these mindsets and systems of authority and identity that keep us from doing so. It consists of monprinted instructions as to how to be human, based on the format of the writing in Jamaica Kincaid's poem “Girl”, displayed around visuals that illustrate and elaborate on them. Here is an excerpt of the monprinted text:

“This is how to be human. Keep your hands to yourself. Be likable. Be attractive. Touch each other, but not too much. This is how to show someone that you care about them. This is how to be stoic. Be mysterious. Be straightforward. Do not drink too much alcohol. This is how to act sober when you shouldn't be drunk. This is how to act drunk when you shouldn't be sober. Do not drink alcohol when you are having too many bad thoughts. Do not skip a party just because you are having too many bad thoughts. Are you still the kind of person who has bad thoughts? This is how to balance your budget. This is how to act responsibly. This is how to survive without health insurance. Don't get sick. This is how to clean out your ears. This is how to clean under your fingernails. Do people clean out their ears every day? This is how not to ask stupid questions. This is how to be human.”



The illustrations surrounding this text are combinations of woodblock, linoleum, photo lithographic, and etched copper prints. These graphic depictions unmistakably reference the human form, but the aesthetic is disturbed, so that their familiarity is interrupted, their relatability halted. The text-based piece of the project was handwritten, scanned, and printed onto printmaking paper to form the tongue in cheek instructions hung throughout the installation. The humor and tragedy in the unrelatability to parts of ourselves is what I hope to convey. My prints are hung 1 inch away from the wall, and 2 inches apart from each other in a flowing mass, referencing the stream of consciousness element in the writing and the visceral quality of the prints (see figure 13)

“How to be Human” contains some of my best prints and writing to date, explaining exactly to the viewer the best and worst and only and many ways to be human. The size (approx. 7 feet tall and 17 feet across, mounted onto an 8 by 18 foot wall) was a necessary part of the installation, as the prints and their message needed to be a somewhat overwhelming to be effective.

Works Cited

Neruda, Pablo. “Pablo Neruda, We Are the Clumsy Passersby, Poets and Poetry at Aspirennies.com.” Aspirennies.com. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Jan. 2013.

Vonnegut, Kurt, and Daniel Simon. *A Man without a Country*. New York: Seven Stories, 2005. Print.

Foster Wallace, David. “Infinite Jest [Paperback].” *Infinite Jest: David Foster Wallace: 9780316066525*: Amazon.com: Books. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Jan. 2013.

Didactic Panel

“How to be Human” is a collection of prints and instructions explaining the best and only and many ways to be human. Do it right, don't do it wrong, and if you insist on doing it wrong, do it somewhere else, and make sure it's the right somewhere else for the nature of your doing it wrong. This is how to be human.

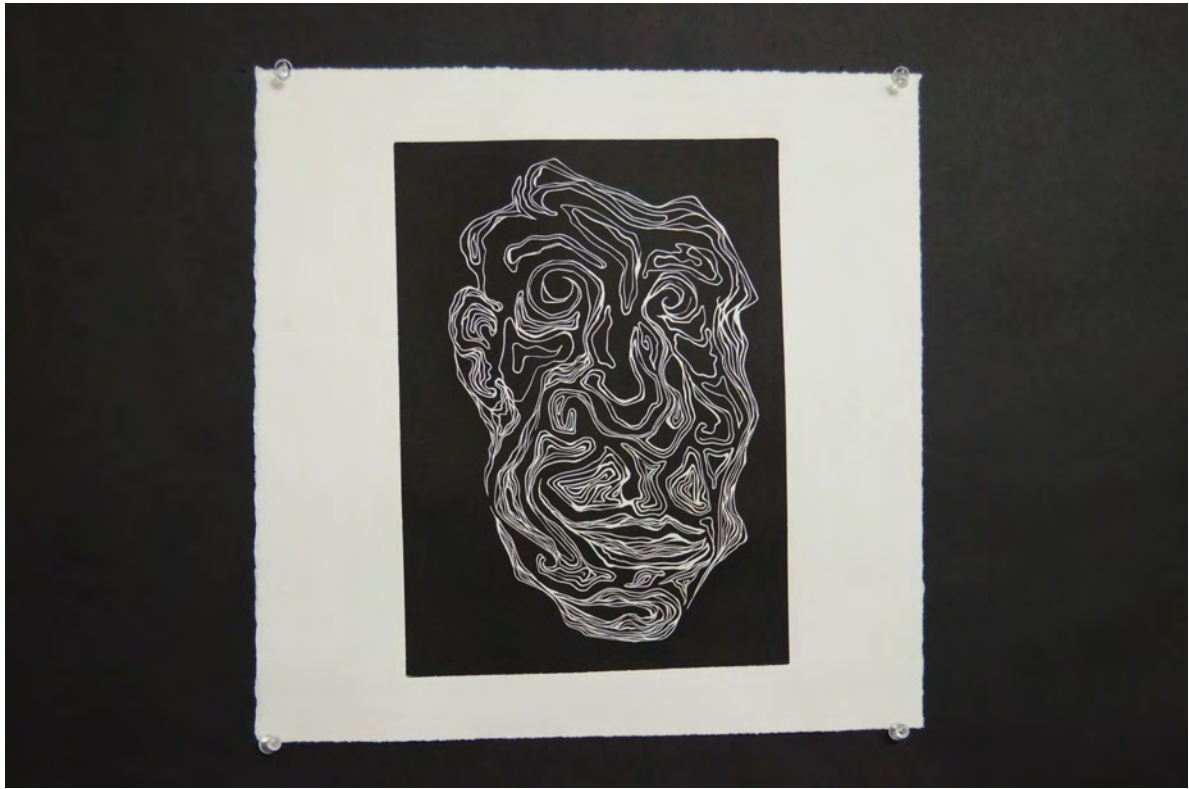


figure 1



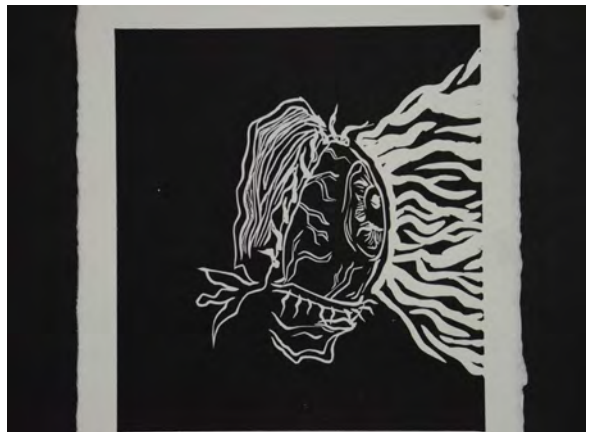
figure 2



figures 3, 4, 5, 6



figure 1





figures 7, 8, 9



figures 10, 11, 12

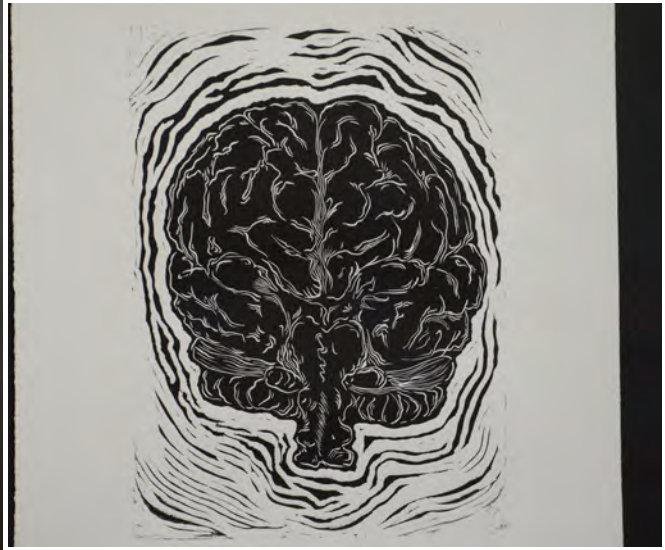
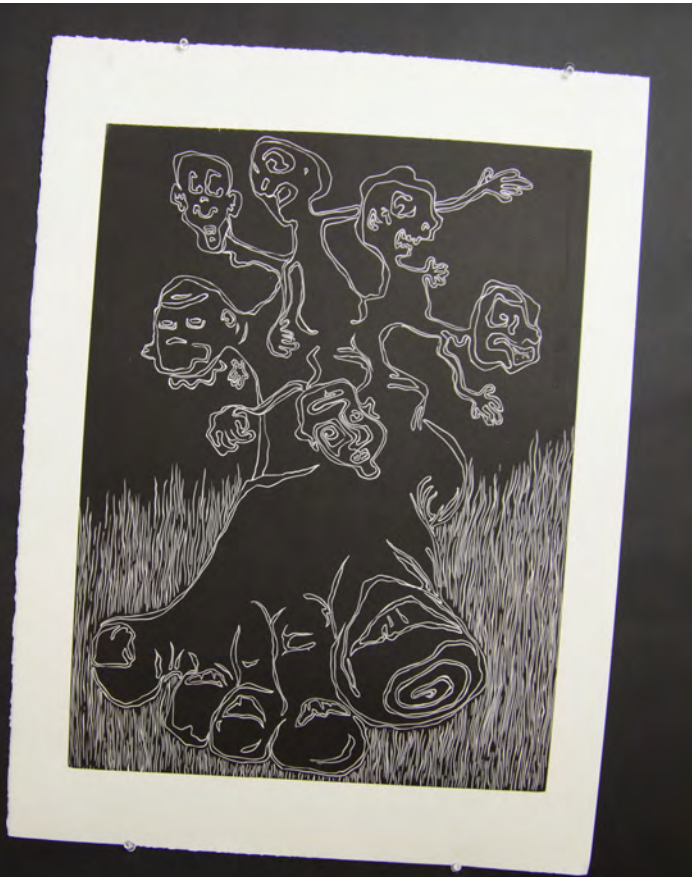




figure 13

GUERRILLA GIRLS' POP QUIZ.

Q. If February is Black History Month and March is Women's History Month, what happens the rest of the year?

A. Discrimination.

BOX 1056 Cooper Sta NY, NY 10276 **GUERRILLA GIRLS** CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD

1990

LOOK FOR
THE MOMENT
WHEN PRIDE
BECOME B
CONTEMPT

**WHO IS FREE
TO CHOOSE?
WHO IS BE-
YOND THE
LAW? WHO IS HEALED? WHO
IS HOUSED? WHO SPEAKS?
WHO IS SILENCED? WHO
SALUTES LONGEST? WHO
PRAYS LOUDEST? WHO DIES
FIRST? WHO LAUGHS LAST?**

figures 14 and 15



figure 16

figure 17

I WANTED ALL
THINGS TO SEEM TO
MAKE SOME SENSE,
SO WE COULD ALL BE
HAPPY, YES, INSTEAD
OF TENSE. AND I
MADE UP LIES, SO
THEY ALL FIT NICE,
AND I MADE THIS
SAD WORLD A
PARADISE.

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BEING HONEST IS NOT ALWAYS THE KINDEST WAY
BEING JUDGMENTAL IS A SIGN OF LIFE
BEING SURE OF YOURSELF MEANS YOU'RE A FOOL
BOREDOM MAKES YOU DO CRAZY THINGS
CALM IS MORE CONDUCTIVE TO CREATIVITY THAN IS ANXIETY
CATEGORIZING FEAR IS CALMING
CHANGE IS VALUABLE WHEN THE OPPRESSED BECOME TYRANTS
CHASING THE NEW IS DANGEROUS TO SOCIETY
CHILDREN ARE THE CRUELEST OF ALL
CHILDREN ARE THE HOPE OF THE FUTURE
CLASS ACTION IS A NICE IDEA WITH NO SUBSTANCE
CLASS STRUCTURE IS AS ARTIFICIAL AS PLASTIC
CONFUSING YOURSELF IS A WAY TO STAY HONEST
CRIME AGAINST PROPERTY IS RELATIVELY UNIMPORTANT
DECADENCE CAN BE AN END IN ITSELF
DECENCY IS A RELATIVE THING
DEPENDENCE CAN BE A MEAL TICKET
DESCRIPTION IS MORE VALUABLE THAN METAPHOR
DEVIANTS ARE SACRIFICED TO INCREASE GROUP SOLIDARITY
DISGUST IS THE APPROPRIATE RESPONSE TO MOST SITUATIONS
DISORGANIZATION IS A KIND OF ANESTHESIA
DON'T PLACE TOO MUCH TRUST IN EXPERTS
DREAMING WHILE AWAKE IS A FRIGHTENING CONTRADICTION
DYING AND COMING BACK GIVES YOU CONSIDERABLE PERSPECTIVE
DYING SHOULD BE AS EASY AS FALLING OFF A LOG
EATING TOO MUCH IS CRIMINAL
ELABORATION IS A FORM OF POLLUTION
EMOTIONAL RESPONSES ARE AS VALUABLE AS INTELLECTUAL RESPONSES
ENJOY YOURSELF BECAUSE YOU CAN'T CHANGE ANYTHING ANYWAY
EVEN YOUR FAMILY CAN BETRAY YOU

figure 18